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**Sun Tzu and Lyndon B. Johnson
The Vietnam Experience**

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The following is a simulated series of correspondence between Sun Tzu and President Lyndon B. Johnson concerning U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. It expresses the author's thoughts concerning how such a dialogue might have transpired. References are included where historical facts are introduced. The author claims full "poetic license" in the use of wording by each of the persona. Quotation marks on some direct quotes have been omitted for the sake of simulation.

May 24, 1964

The Past

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to you this day to attempt to persuade you to reconsider your intentions towards increased United States involvement in the conflict between the peoples of Vietnam. I am not concerned with the honorable intentions of you and your government, in that you believe what you are doing is good and right. I also believe that you should take counsel in my teachings and relay them to your generals. If, after hearing my advice, you choose to continue your involvement and escalation, I will not surrender but will continue to offer my advice because war is a matter of vital importance to the state; the province of life or death; the road for survival or ruin.¹

The study of war and the strategies that either win or lose them is of the utmost importance for the leader of a great nation. I know that a large and powerful country like the United States of America might never feel threatened by the small and backward country of North Vietnam. On this point I would caution against arrogance. As I have taught, know the enemy and know yourself, in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.² I believe that your counterpart in North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh has studied my teachings and will use them as the basis for his strategy. You have avoided

¹Samuel B. Griffith, trans., The Art of War, by Sun Tzu (London, Oxford University Press, 1963), 63

²Griffith, 34

getting to understand the true nature of your enemy. The people of Vietnam have been warring against Western Imperialism since 1847 and were warring against each other before the first permanent English settlement in North America.³ You can be assured that the North Vietnamese are well versed on the United States of America. The following was written by General Nguyen Chi Thanh:

We do not have any illusions about the United States. We do not underestimate our opponent - the strong and cunning U S imperialism. But we are not afraid of the United States. If, on the contrary, one is afraid of the United States and thinks that to offend it would court failure, and that firm opposition to United States imperialism would touch off a nuclear war, then the only course left would be to compromise with and surrender to United States Imperialism.⁴

Add to this the following by General Giap.

From the military point of view, The Vietnamese people's war of liberation proved that an insufficiently equipped people's army, but an army fighting for a just cause, can, with appropriate strategy and tactics, combine the conditions needed to conquer a modern army of aggressive imperialism.⁵

Does this sound like an enemy who will be easily defeated? The French would have much to say about their war with Vietnam, if you would just seek and take to heart their counsel.

During the course of my arguments I may point out which of my principles you should be especially cognizant of and those in which I believe Ho Chi Minh and his generals will follow. A fellow theorist of mine has stated. "Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. Friction is the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult." My friend goes on to point out that there is only one

³Stanley Karnow, Vietnam A History, (New York, Penguin, 1991) 686

⁴William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam, (Boulder, Colorado, Westview, 1981) 224

⁵Vo Nguyen Giap People's War, People's Army (New York: International Publishers, 1968) 30

lubricant that will reduce this abrasion. combat experience ⁶ Mr President, your troops will be going against combat hardened veterans. Many of your younger troops have not seen combat, your older veterans have been away from war for over a decade, and I would venture to say that none have seen the type of combat that they will encounter in Vietnam.

At the end of this, my first letter to you, allow me to finish with this If you should decide to continue with the war, remember, victory is the main object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale depressed For there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.⁷

I am enclosing a copy of my book, The Art of War, for your perusal.

Sun Tzu

June 1, 1964

The White House

Dear Mr. Sun Tzu,

It was with pleasure that I received your letter of May 24. Thank you for the book which I can assure you I will read when I have time. I appreciate your comments and recommendations expressed. As you may be aware, I sent my Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Vietnam so they could get a look at the country and report back to me their recommendations They reported back to me and made several points. I will share these with you, but please keep them to yourself

Both called for increased U S. commitment of aid to help in the struggle of the people of South Vietnam to keep themselves from being overrun by the Communists in the north. Secretary McNamara and General Taylor wants us to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam with increased quantities of new equipment My other Chiefs

⁶Carl von Clausewitz, On War, trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976) 119-122

⁷Griffith, 73

of Staff feel that immediate U S. military measures against North Vietnam is necessary. My objections to both recommendations are twofold. One, direct U S. involvement at this time would invite increased enemy action, an eventuality that the military and political situation in South Vietnam could not handle. Two, if we strike the North, the Russians and the Chinese might retaliate.⁸

I have greater things to worry about here at home. The Great Society which I hope to build in the United States is an endeavor which will take our total national will and resources. I do not want to get involved in action in some pissant country in Southeast Asia, sending American boys to fight a war that the Asian boys should fight. But the spread of Communism must be stopped, and if I do not stop it, I would be called a coward and lose my opportunity to see the birth of the Great Society.

Trust me when I say that the situation will receive my utmost attention. I welcome further letters from you.

Sincerely,

Lyndon B Johnson

March 9, 1965

The Past

Dear Mr. President,

Much has happened since our last communication. I thank you for the candid comments of your letter. You can be assured that I will hold those comments in complete confidence. I had hoped by the tone of those comments that another letter to you might be unnecessary. But the incident in the Tonkin Gulf, the beginning of bombing of North Vietnam and finally, the landing yesterday of the first U S combat troops in Vietnam brings me to feel the need to write you again.

⁸Herbert Y. Schandler, The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1977), 4-5

It is apparent that you have been receiving advise from many quarters I will be no different. It appears to me that you can not decide if you want to war or not My first advice would be to decide, one way or the other, then commit yourself to that course of action. I have said: "He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious."⁹ I continue to urge you to abandon your plans in Vietnam. If your decision is to fight, as apparently it is, my recommendation to you is to let your generals fight the war. They are the experts in the matters of war and should not be hindered by a ruler I have said: "He whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious."¹⁰

Have you found time to read my book yet?

Sun Tzu

December 24, 1965

The White House

Dear Sun Tzu,

I apologize for the delay in answering your letter I have been very busy with this Vietnam problem, so busy in fact that I have not yet read your excellent book. As you said, I have been getting advice from everyone The problem here is that there are so many diametrically opposed opinions. General Westmoreland requested a three phase war which called for commitment of U S. forces necessary to halt the losing trend by the end of this year On the advice of my Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, I have approved sending a sizable force into Vietnam Secretary Rusk stated that "The integrity of the U.S commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world "¹¹ I

⁹Griffith, 82

¹⁰Griffith, 81

¹¹Schandler, pp 27-29

agree with Secretary Rusk. If we run out on Southeast Asia, I can see trouble ahead in every part of the globe-not just in Asia but in the Middle East and in Europe, in Africa and in Latin America. I am convinced that our retreat from this challenge will open the path to World War III. I know our people well enough to realize that if we walk away from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia fall, there will follow a divisive and destructive debate within our country. . . . A divisive debate over "who lost Vietnam" would be, in my judgment, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been. It would inevitably increase isolationist pressures from the right and from the left and cause a pulling back from our commitments in Europe and the Middle East as well as in Asia.¹²

We are continuing our efforts to get the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. To try to add some motivation, I have announced a temporary cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam. I began the bombing at the urging of my advisors in hopes that it would convince Hanoi to negotiate a settlement in quick fashion. With the bombing of targets (some of which I helped to choose), and our troops, who number nearly 200,000 now, I am sure that old Ho will see the light and we can get out of this thing.

Sincerely,

Lyndon B. Johnson

March 26, 1968

The Past

Dear Mr. President,

I have watched with ever growing concern the troubles you and your countrymen have endured over the past three years. I can offer you analysis of the most recent Tet offensive as evidence of the wisdom of my teachings. Now the reason the enlightened

¹²Schandler, 30

prince and the wise general conquer the enemy whenever they move and their achievements surpass those of ordinary men is foreknowledge.¹³ The modern terminology is intelligence. Your lack of intelligence on the plans, size and dispersal of the enemy was unforgivable. Your own working group has stated "most commanders and intelligence officers at all levels did not visualize the enemy as capable of accomplishing his stated goals as they appeared in propaganda and in captured documents."¹⁴ Had you found time to read my book, you would have known this: All warfare is based on deception. Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance, and Attack where he is unprepared. sally out when he does not expect you.¹⁵ These are principles that the North Vietnamese have been following for decades. It is obvious that the North Vietnamese, up to this point, have been drawing you into a prolonged war which, if you remember from my first letter, will damage morale, not only of the army, but also of the people. You have seen the sentiments of your own people turn against the war, and the reports of low morale among the soldiers must be taken seriously. This latest series of attacks will serve to heighten those feelings of disapproval and justify, in the minds of the North Vietnamese, the sacrifices they made. It is a doctrine of war not to assume the enemy will not come, but rather to rely on one's readiness to meet him; not to presume that he will not attack, but rather to make one's self invincible.¹⁶

Mr. President, I hope you will take the wisdom of my counsel in the spirit it is intended, not as criticism, but as a teaching tool for you to use. Read my book, please

Sun Tzu

¹³Griffith, 144

¹⁴Schandler, 76

¹⁵Griffith, 66, 67, 69

¹⁶Griffith, 114

March 30, 1968

The White House

Dear Sun Tzu,

If you have been following the news, you will know that the Vietnamese problem has gotten worse. Our fiscal situation is abominable. What will happen if we cut housing, education, poverty programs? I don't give a damn about the election. The country's demoralized. I will have overwhelming disapproval in the polls. I will go down the drain. How can we get this job done? We need more money - in an election year, more taxes - in an election year, more troops - in an election year; and cuts in the domestic budget - in an election year. And yet I cannot tell the people what they will get in Vietnam in return for these cuts. We have no support for the war.¹⁷ Now, some of my advisors, my so-called circle of "wise men", tell me that the South Vietnamese government and Army are so corrupt and inept that it might take five or ten years to achieve any real progress.¹⁸

I am going to restrict air strikes to below the twentieth parallel. We've got to get the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table and end this war. Maybe if I'd read your book and followed any of its teachings, we wouldn't be in this predicament now. You can be sure that I will include it as a pass down item to whoever has this job next. It's too late for me to read it. The damage is already done. Hopefully, we can learn from our mistakes and never get ourselves in this position again.

Thank you for your advise and counsel. I truly wish I had followed it closer. If you are ever in Texas, come see us.

Lyndon B. Johnson

¹⁷Karnow, 576¹⁸Karnow, 575